



MATERIALISM, MATTER AND MATERIALITY IN THE WORK OF ALTHUSSER

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ABSTRACT

Over a decade ago, a number of philosophers declared that the time of what they called “the linguistic turn,” that is, a philosophical orientation to language as the sole medium through which reality could be apprehended, had come to an end, having foundered on its own contradictions. In its place, they proposed a turn to objects or things, that is, that to which we were previously told we could gain access only through language or consciousness, insofar as they reflected or represented reality from a position outside of it. Thus, they established the materiality of objects, but at the expense of a dematerialization of language. One of the principal targets of the new materialism was the concept of ideology, to them a realm of ideas, not things. In his famous essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” published in 1970, Althusser preempted the arguments of the new materialism by asserting that ideology does not consist of ideas but exists in the materiality of apparatuses, practices and rituals. Just as importantly, discourse too possessed a materiality and a reality which was the necessary condition of its functions, including the production of meaning.

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Philosophy represents the people's class struggle in theory. In return it helps the people to distinguish in *theory* and in all *ideas* (political, ethical, aesthetic, etc.) between true ideas and false ideas. In principle, true ideas always serve the people; false ideas always serve the enemies of the people.

Louis Althusser, "Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon" (1968 [1971, 21])

The question of materialism has clearly taken on a renewed importance today, especially in the Anglophone world. Less clear is the status of the question of materiality, a question that materialist analyses have often overlooked or avoided. Can we speak of the materiality of what Marxists have called ideology, often understood as the word itself indicates as pertaining to the realm of ideas, beliefs and representations? This is not merely a theoretical question; on the contrary, from the position one takes on the question of the materiality of ideology, a series of practical, political consequences follows. The problem is that few are aware of having ever taken a position on this question because, for the most part, the question to which the assumptions that govern their politics constitute a response has never been posed. Furthermore, the fact that these assumptions have been translated into practical form and their existence as theoretical problems forgotten, means that their truth or validity seems obvious. There is perhaps no greater demonstration of this forgetting than the emergence of a number of distinct tendencies that together constitute the "new materialism." Despite their different reference points and theoretical objects, most have defined themselves from the beginning in opposition to "the linguistic turn" (Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011, 1), understood as a focus on "discourse, text, culture, consciousness, power or ideas," to return to "reality" (2). The Linguistic Turn, according to the proponents of the new materialism, was fundamentally a turn away from reality, that is, reality independent of human thought, in favor of reality understood as the correlate of human thought and therefore imprisoned by and in it. The basic categories and concepts at work in the new, speculative, materialism, like the problems that flow from these categories and concepts (its problematic), are in fact anything but new: they are precisely the epistemological obstacles that Althusser identified as

blocking the way to the development of a materialism capable of rendering intelligible the world we seek to change.

The rapid and widespread acceptance of the assumptions that underlie the new materialism is a sign of the obviousness that both prevents them from being questioned and renders important aspects of Althusser's discussion of materialism and materiality largely unintelligible. And no one has shown a greater interest in the notion of the obvious than Louis Althusser. We might say that the obviousness or *evidence* of the response to the question of the materiality of ideology, for Althusser, itself exhibits the solidity and resistance to force commonly associated with the notion of materiality. To examine the category of the obvious, that is, to problematize what amounts to the obviousness of the obvious, as Althusser did in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" and therefore in relation to ideology, is to confront and explain what he called its "*tenacité*." (Althusser 1995, 270) To describe a material as "*tenace*" is to say that it "oppose une grande résistance à la rupture," and that it "possède des qualités de solidité" (according to *Le trésor de la langue française*). Indeed, an essential property of the obvious is its capacity to "hold" in the face of countervailing forces or pressures and thus tenaciously to resist both decomposition and deconstruction through a necessary coincidence of the objective and subjective forms of tenacity. Moreover, what is obvious or *evident* is not simply what cannot be avoided because it is in our way (as in the Latin *ob-via*) or because it appears as what cannot *not* be seen. Obviousnesses or *evidences* stand in our way or are inescapably seen because they are imposed on us, positioned before us like an obstacle, not simply rendered visible (*evidence* is derived from the Latin *videre* or *video*), but endowed with a visibility that commands our vision. The obviousness that concerns Althusser is thus not what Aristotle called *ἔνδοξα* (*endoxa*) (Topics I.1), that is, pre-judgments or prejudices that necessarily precede any judgment, and that, according to Pierre Aubenque, "being the foundation of any possible demonstration [...] cannot themselves be demonstrated" (Aubenque 1992, 258). If it can be said of the obvious that it commands our vision or that it is imposed on us as such without our knowledge or consent, then we are no longer speaking of common sense, or what everybody knows to be true, except perhaps as an effect of the obvious. The force and efficacy of the obvious, in Althusser's sense, depends on a broader concatenation or apparatus of forces, and may be understood as an effect of the subjection he sought to make visible precisely by diminishing the power of the obvious.

Spinoza, in a passage that fascinated, and perhaps also haunted, Althusser, argued that people "are so firmly persuaded" (*adeo firmiter persuasi*

sunt) that the mind determines the body to act, or has command over the body, that they cannot be induced to examine this belief (EI P2 Sch.). And this belief, above all, concerns beliefs, the freedom with which we determine ourselves to believe something, as well as the fact that we act on the basis of our freely held beliefs or convictions. The political consequences of these ideas are significant: not only do we regard ourselves as responsible causally and legally/morally for our actions, but on a larger scale, believe that to bring about social change, we must first change beliefs in order to change actions. It is to this passage that Althusser's first thesis on ideology in the essay on Ideological State Apparatuses refers: it concerns "the object which is 'represented' in the imaginary form of ideology" (Althusser 1971, 162). The object "represented" (the quotation marks indicating that the very notion of representation is in question even as Althusser feels constrained to use it) in an imaginary form is not reality (social or historical), not even the reality of class society: "Ideology is a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (*ibid.*). The object represented in imaginary form is thus not even an object in any obvious way; it is a relation or "*rapport*," the "relation" of individuals to their conditions of existence, beginning, of course, with the individual's relation to his or her own body, the relationship that, we are firmly persuaded, is one of command, authority and proprietorship. The obviousness of this imaginary relationship is so tenacious, according to Spinoza, that even the daily instruction of experience to the contrary does nothing to diminish its hold. Why does Althusser place so much emphasis on a relation, above all, an imaginary relation? Because the attribution or imputation of authorship/authority and proprietorship to the individual is an imaginary (we might even say false) representation that is nevertheless absolutely real and material, and endowed with punitive and coercive power. The obviousness of individuals' relation to their "own" actions, the obviousness of their causal and moral responsibility for their actions, the obvious justice of the fact that only each one alone can legitimately be punished for their actions, is produced and maintained by apparatuses, practices and rituals that impose certain facts, certain relations on us as undeniably true.

It is thus no accident that the text in which Althusser most directly addresses the questions surrounding the idea of materialism is devoted to the concept of ideology. Even in the late writings on aleatory materialism, only a section of his interview with Fernanda Navarro concerns the concept of materiality (including the materiality of ideology). There, Althusser repeats what he argues in more detail in the essay on Ideological State Apparatuses

(ISAs), with the exception of a very interesting excursus on the notion of materiality in Derrida's work, which deserves its own study (Althusser 2006, 261). It appears that Althusser understood the realm designated as ideology, beginning with Marx and Engels, as a testing ground for the concept of materiality, a terrain that will reveal the degree to which the material existence of ideology allows it to resist the forces that might otherwise bring about its decomposition, as well as the forms of this resistance. Althusser, the inveterate risk-taker in philosophy, saw no choice but to test his concepts in what Trotsky called "the merciless laboratory of history" (Trotsky 1940, 44), including the history of the theoretical practice of the socialist and communist movements. To analyze or even to assemble the results of his theoretical experiments and interventions, however, is not easy, in part because of the unsystematic and scattered form of his investigations. But more importantly, what was genuinely new in Althusser's discussion of "the material existence of ideology" (Althusser 1971, 165) remained invisible and illegible or, to the extent it registered at all, was quickly subject to a generalized forgetting. Of course, this rendering invisible or forgotten was not primarily the fault of his readers, as if they simply did not see what was before them; it is the objective effect of his own texts, specifically, the means he employed in his attempt to diminish the obviousness of the obvious and thereby allow a new conception of materialism to become visible.

The ISAs essay is a perfect example of the conflictual and ambivalent character of Althusser's philosophical strategy, in particular, his recourse to theoretical impersonation: what is irreducible to any previous notion of ideology must nevertheless appear in the guise of previous theories, presented not as something new but as an aspect of already existing notions of ideology that had gone unnoticed or untheorized. The result was a forgetting of what was new in Althusser that did not take the form of the absence, disappearance or repression of certain notions. Instead, Althusser insisted on tying what was new to familiar modes of expression in an attempt to define, redefine or translate it so as to convince his readers that what was in fact new, was nevertheless compatible with the already known and the already said. A single example will suffice to illustrate this point: in the English speaking world where the ISAs essay is by far the most widely read of Althusser's work, the idea that Althusser has advanced a theory of false consciousness, that is, of ideology as deception or illusion possesses an obviousness so tenacious that up to now no demonstration, no reading of the text, has been able to dislodge this interpretation which, in its obviousness, functions as an obstacle to thinking what Althusser called the material existence of ideology.

Indeed, it appears that the most powerful effect of Althusser's declaration that ideology has a material existence was to provoke a redefinition of both the noun, materialism, and the adjective, materialist, that, if anything, was opposed to what Althusser tried to capture with the terms materiality or material existence. We might take as examples of this semantic movement the title of a well-known book published in 1977, Coward and Ellis's *Language and Materialism*, cited nearly a thousand times by the year 2000. Here, in a work that refers frequently to Althusser's ISAs essay, the word materialism in the title in no way refers to what Althusser conceives as the specific materiality of language or discourse and to which Althusser and a group that included Balibar, Badiou and others had devoted a written discussion in 1966-67 (Althusser 2003). Instead, "materialism" in the title designates what was once called "material determination," that is, the determination of the ideological/political superstructure by the economic base, a paradoxical materialism that must divide the reality that constitutes its object of knowledge into material and immaterial realms in order to declare the primacy of the first over the second. I want to be clear that what we might call the idealist residue in these examples, in no way deprives them of theoretical and political interest. It does, however, prevent them from moving beyond what Althusser called the classical conceptions of causality.

It is at this point that we can draw the first line of demarcation between what Althusser calls materialism and that bipartite doctrine according to which materialism was divided into form and content, and history and method, whose most elaborate codification appeared in Stalin's enormously influential 1938 text, *Historical and Dialectical Materialism*, itself a synthesis of ideas from Dietzgen, Engels, Plekhanov and Lenin, as well as Marx and Engels (Stalin 1938).

While I will argue that what is new in Althusser's notion of materialism can only be understood in its specificity on the condition that it is separated from the theories of dialectical materialism and historical materialism whose institutional status in the Communist movement made them articles of faith, it is not the case that he simply ignored or set aside Stalin's text (at least before 1968). We need only recall that he responded to the criticisms of "Contradiction and Overdetermination" by adopting and attempting to develop Stalin's version of the two materialisms in "On the Materialist Dialectic:" as for Stalin, historical materialism was the "science of history," while Althusser's conception of dialectical materialism emphasized far more than Stalin the discontinuities that separated what he now called Theory from philosophy proper (reserving "the term *philosophy* for *ideological* philosophies") (Althusser 1969, 62). Perhaps even more importantly, Stalin's short

book represented a philosophical genre that fascinated Althusser and that he repeatedly but unsuccessfully attempted to master, a philosophy text for militants, for non-philosophers, for the masses through whose struggle alone philosophy could be realized.

In fact, one of the most enduring achievements of Stalin's text was to have isolated and then presented as the central thesis of Historical Materialism what is now called the model of base and superstructure. The forgetting of Althusser's postulate of the material existence of ideology in apparatuses, practices and rituals, not only permitted a reassertion of what he called the metaphor or even the topographical image of the base-superstructure model held up today as materialist or even as the foundational concept of any conceivable materialism, but served to render his thesis on the materiality of ideology unthinkable. We are reminded that the "material base or basis" determines the rest of social existence, leaving aside the question of whether the rest can itself be characterized as "material," or whether the function of materialism would be to differentiate between material and non-material, immaterial or ideal modes of existence. In the latter case, materialism would have accepted the dualism of spirit and matter, differing from theological and idealist tendencies only in that it granted primacy, causal and ontological, to matter over spirit or thought, instead of the reverse.

While certain elements of the ISAs essay took shape in such posthumously published texts as "Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences" and "Three notes on the Theory of Discourses", the political stakes of the notion of the materiality of ideology were most clearly articulated in the anonymously published "On the Cultural Revolution" which appeared in *Cahiers marxiste-léninistes* in 1966 (Althusser 2014). In this brief text, Althusser defends the Chinese Cultural Revolution by defending the notion of cultural revolution in general and giving it a theoretical justification. He cautions his readers that the model of base and superstructure as commonly understood is founded on an erroneous notion of causality, as well as a failure to understand what we may now call the materiality of the ideological superstructure:

once a socialist country has suppressed the economic bases of the old social classes, it might think it has suppressed classes and therefore class struggle. It might think that class struggle has been overcome, even though it continues to play itself out in the political domain and above all in the ideological domain. Not seeing that class struggle can unfold in its purest form [*par excellence*] in the ideological sphere is to abandon the sphere of the ideological to bourgeois

ideology, to abandon the terrain to the adversary. (Althusser 2014, 13)

We are familiar with the notion of causality often attributed to Marx's explanation of base and superstructure in the preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*: "the economic structure of society" is "the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness." The ideological superstructure arises from or is initiated by the economic foundation (the verb is *erheben*), but it is not simply an excrescence of this foundation. Marx argues that it "arises from the economic base or *Struktur*," which "conditions the process of social, political and intellectual life." The German verb translated here as "conditions" is *bedingen*, whose most common meaning is "require" or "necessitate." Thus, the base both determines and requires a superstructure that corresponds to it. Accordingly, when the economic base changes by means of the class struggle, this change must "lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure" (Marx 1977, 3).

Althusser's essay on the Cultural Revolution represents a pointed critique of this passage, in particular, of the idea that each economic structure produces the superstructure that it needs. Although Marx is very careful not to resort to the language of expression or emanation to explain the causal relation between base and superstructure and in fact avoids the question of causality altogether here, his successors quickly filled the empty spaces with both functionalist theories (the base, like a collective subject produces the superstructure that it requires) and a theory of the phenomenality or even epiphenomenality of the ideological superstructure which can be explained by but cannot itself explain the economic base. In an important sense, its reality lies outside of it in the material foundation that produces it and of which it is the expression. Ideology is the ideal or spiritual (*geistige*) expression of material life. Generations of Marxists have defended the paradoxical thesis that the immateriality of ideology, its "secondarity" (to use Derrida's phrase) in relation to the real and the material economic processes of life is a necessary component of the materialist theory of history (Derrida 1976, 7). Althusser argues in relation to the question of the Cultural Revolution that such theories are not simply erroneous but politically disastrous. If the post-capitalist economy produces the ideological structure proper to it and does so more or less automatically, there can be no regression to capitalism and hence no need to guard against its return or to wage a struggle at the level of the ideological superstructure. The fact that ideology consists of ideas rather than apparatuses and practices (or even customs and rituals) serves as a guarantee of the more or less automatic transformation of ideology into

what is required by the mode of production. This brief text on the Cultural Revolution helps us understand why the questions of matter and materiality occupy a more important place in an essay on ideology than anywhere else in Althusser's work and what is at stake in these questions.

In a very important sense, we can say that nearly everything Althusser wrote in one way or another represents a repudiation of such a notion of materialism. There is a terrible irony in the fact that Althusser's phrase "the economy is determinant in the last instance" is repeated (but not cited) not only in support of the notion of base and superstructure but without any awareness of the fact that it constitutes the first part of a paradox whose latter half has been all but forgotten: "the economy is determinant in the last instance" [but or and] "the solitary hour of the last instance never comes" (Althusser 1969, 113). The suppression of the second proposition is anything but trivial; to forget it is to forget what lies at the center of Althusser's work, from 1960 until mid-eighties, that is, his never-ending effort to "break with all the classical conceptions of causality" (Althusser 2015, 344). This is nothing more than a matter of a few words, of a formula or proposition suspended, left unfinished, but they are irreplaceable words for which there can be no substitution because they, individually or in combination, produce an effect that no other words can produce. The resistance to translation, the tenacity and solidity of a word without an equivalent, indissoluble and irreducible—such is the materiality proper to discourse:

Why does philosophy fight over words? The realities of the class struggle are 'represented' by 'ideas' which are 'represented' by words. In scientific and philosophical reasoning, the words (concepts, categories) are 'instruments' of knowledge. But in political, ideological and philosophical struggle, the words are also weapons, explosives or tranquillizers and poisons. Occasionally, the whole class struggle may be summed up in the struggle for one word against another word. Certain words struggle amongst themselves as enemies. Other words are the site of an ambiguity: the stake in a decisive but undecided battle. (Althusser 1971, 24).

In the spirit of this declaration, I want to examine three words, Althusser's own words, together and separately sites of struggle, instruments of knowledge, weapons: the words matter, material (in its adjectival form) and materiality as they are used in the ISAs essay. None of the words appears with any frequency in Althusser's work as a whole: outside of the essay on ideology they are quite rare, although less so in texts or fragments of texts he chose not to publish during his lifetime. We might pass to the materialist gesture of counting things, recognizing, however, that the things in question

are words, whose reality (*realitas*, derived from the Latin *res* or thing) remains a problem or question for many self-described materialists today. For Althusser, following Spinoza, words are things endowed with a sonorous or graphic existence, a conjunction of letters or phonemes that together may produce an effect. In the ISAs essay, the adjective “material” appears 32 times, most often as “material existence,” followed by “material practice” and “material conditions.” “Materiality” occurs 4 times, as does “matter” in the sense of physical matter. These are words in struggle, mobilized against the dominant conceptions of ideology (on full display in the debates that followed the revolt of May-June 1968) as a system of false ideas and beliefs that determines individuals’ action, an ideological superstructure whose reality lies outside of itself, in the economic base whose needs it expresses and whose reproduction it secures.

I will examine the struggle for words and between words in two passages, both from the section entitled Thesis Two: Ideology has a Material Existence:

[1] Of course, the material existence of the ideology in an apparatus and its practices does not have the same modality as the material existence of a paving-stone or a rifle. But, at the risk of being taken for a Neo-Aristotelian (NB Marx had a very high regard for Aristotle), I shall say that ‘matter is discussed in many senses’, or rather that it exists in different modalities, all rooted in the last instance in ‘physical’ matter. (Althusser 1971, 166).

Bien entendu, l'existence matérielle de l'idéologie dans un appareil et ses pratiques ne possède pas la même modalité que l'existence matérielle d'un pavé ou d'un fusil. Mais, quitte à nous faire traiter de néo-aristotélicien, (signalons que Marx portait une très haute estime à Aristote), nous dirons que « la matière se dit en plusieurs sens » ou plutôt qu'elle existe sous différentes modalités, toutes enracinées en dernière instance dans la matière « physique ». (Althusser 1995, 299).

[2] I shall therefore say that, where only a single subject (such and such an individual) is concerned, the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that *his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject*. Naturally, the four inscriptions of the adjective ‘material’ in my proposition must be affected by different modalities: the materialities of a displacement for going to mass, of kneeling down, of the gesture of the sign of the cross, or of the *mea culpa*, of a

sentence, of a prayer, of an act of contrition, of a penitence, of a gaze, of a hand-shake, of an external verbal discourse or an 'internal' verbal discourse (consciousness), are not one and the same materiality. I shall leave on one side the problem of a theory of the differences between the modalities of materiality. (Althusser 1971, 169)

Nous dirons donc, à ne considérer qu'un sujet (tel individu), que l'existence des idées de sa croyance est matérielle, en ce que ses idées sont ses actes matériels insérés dans des pratiques matérielles, réglées par des rituels matériels eux-mêmes définis par l'appareil idéologique matériel dont relèvent les idées de ce sujet. Naturellement, les quatre adjectifs « matériels » inscrits dans notre proposition doivent être affectés de modalités différentes : la matérialité d'un déplacement pour aller à la messe, d'un agenouillement, d'un geste de signe de croix ou de mea culpa, d'une phrase, d'une prière, d'une contrition, d'une pénitence, d'un regard, d'une poignée de main, d'un discours verbal externe ou d'un discours verbal « interne » (la conscience), n'étant pas une seule et même matérialité. Nous laissons en suspens la théorie de la différence des modalités de la matérialité. (Althusser 1995, 301).

At the very moment Althusser declares that ideology does not have an ideal or spiritual existence, but a material existence, and that ideas and by extension ideologies exist only in apparatuses and practices, he introduces a distinction that will replace the dualisms of matter and spirit, body and soul, materiality and ideality and, in the process, exclude any recourse to an immaterial substance. Instead of a vertical hierarchy of substances, Althusser proposes a horizontal theory of the different modalities of matter. In part, this gesture, which will be repeated in the second passage I cite, prevents matter from appearing as an undifferentiated and featureless "stuff," even as it rules out an ontological hierarchy of distinct substances. At this point, Althusser invokes Aristotle's famous statement at the beginning of Book Delta of the *Metaphysics*, τὸ δὲ ὄν λέγεται μὲν πολλαχῶς, or "being is said (or discussed) in many senses," but he translates τὸ ὄν, typically rendered as "being," as "matter," just as he translates "being is said or discussed in many senses," as "matter [...] exists in different modalities." He thus substitutes "matter" for "being," the verb "exist" for the verb λέγω, and "different modalities" for πολλαχῶς ("in different ways") (Aristotle 1952, Book Delta: 2).

Indeed, the relation between the citation from Aristotle "matter [or being] is discussed in different senses" and Althusser's reworking of the sentence as "matter exists in different modalities" is not, as is so typical in Althusser, one of equivalence or quasi equivalence, indicated by the phrase

“c’est-à-dire,” or “that is.” This rhetorical device, itself a translation or transposition of Spinoza’s use of the conjunction “sive,” as in *Deus, sive Natura*, as a means of rendering equivalent or even identical terms or concepts generally considered to be opposed and whose opposition is imposed upon us as obvious, appears 46 times in the ISAs essay. Its frequency makes the case before us all the more noteworthy. Aristotle’s comment on being appears in Althusser’s text only to be superseded, a movement signaled by the phrase, “ou plutôt,” (“or rather”), indicating that Althusser’s re-writing of Aristotle is not only in some sense an improvement over the original, but is irreducible to it.

Althusser argues that ideology understood as immanent in apparatuses, practices and rituals, as well as discourses internal and external, can no longer be conceived as a set of ideas or representations characterized by an “ideal or spiritual existence.” On the contrary, the concept of ideality itself has a material existence and is itself inscribed in apparatuses, practices, rituals. The hierarchical distinction between spirit and matter thus gives way not to the empty uniformity of undifferentiated matter, but to the irreducible difference of modes or modalities. Althusser informs us that the material existence of ideology in an apparatus and its practices does not have the same modality as the material existence of a paving-stone or a rifle and that “matter exists in different modalities, all rooted in the last instance in ‘physical’ matter.” This latter phrase is important in several respects: Althusser does not say that matter “is expressed” in different modalities, as if matter were a substance or substrate whose unity would precede the diversity of its emanations. Nor does he say that diversity is produced at the level of language, as if it is in being spoken about that there occurs a differentiation of what would otherwise be undifferentiated matter.

On the contrary, what is striking in this sequence of propositions is the oscillation between the assertion of the unity of matter, finally guaranteed by its rootedness in “physical” matter [...] in the last instance” and the equally emphatic assertion of its diversity, that is, the decisive “differences between the modalities of materiality,” the emblem of which in the text, a kind of apostrophe to his ideal audience, is the opposition between the ISAs (and the ideologies immanent in them) and a paving stone (the kind that were dug up from the street during May 68 and used as projectiles or piled together to block the passage of police vehicles) or a rifle (a synecdoche of armed struggle and people’s war, recalling China, Vietnam, Algeria, and Cuba). These, again, are powerful, evocative words whose power is indissociable from the relationship of forces in the street, in the factory and in the schools, like words written on a banner held up at a mass demonstration or

chanted by thousands of voices simultaneously. The words “paving stone” (*pavé*) seldom, if ever, appear in works of political philosophy, even before European states decided to remove them or cover them up so that they could not be used as weapons. In Althusser’s hands, they become a mnemonic device for a collective recollection of past struggles and the intelligence they brought us of the vulnerabilities and weak points of the ISAs and the impossibility of maintaining the existing order by the repression of the Repressive State Apparatuses alone.

In the second of the two passages Althusser speaks of the modalities of matter, or rather in this case modalities of materiality that would allow us to distinguish what he identifies as distinct materialities: “the material existence of material acts, inserted into material practices governed by material rituals themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which the ideas of this subject arise.” Immediately following this hyperbolic assertion of the material existence of every instance of ideology understood as incarnate in apparatuses, Althusser tells us: “les quatre adjectifs « matériels » inscrits dans notre proposition doivent être affectés de modalités différentes.” While “un discours verbal externe ou [...] un discours verbal « interne »” has a material existence that is in no way less material than the material existence of the acts of kneeling, of making the sign of the cross, of striking the breast three times during the act of contrition, theirs is not “une seule et même matérialité.” The difference lies in their modality, or the mode they constitute. Here, again in an essay that draws on Spinoza constantly, although usually without naming him, Althusser approaches the notion of immanence and immanent causality: “Particular things are nothing but affections of the attributes of God, that is, modes wherein the attributes of God find expression in a definite and determinate way.” (EI, P25 cor.). The concept of matter thus not only comes to take the place of Aristotle’s being, but also of Spinoza’s God. Matter always already modified, already expressed in an infinity of finite modes or things, would appear to exist nowhere but in the diversity of its expressions, to which Althusser adds, as if to save matter from disappearing altogether, all rooted in the last instance in “physical matter” [*toutes enracinées en dernière instance dans la matière « physique »*].

These, of course, are typical Althusserian motifs: the deferral of an urgent theoretical task that marks it as simultaneously necessary and impossible (not a priori, but conjuncturally). His use of the phrase “in the last instance,” functions here as elsewhere in his work as what Balibar calls a “point of heresy,” a paradox or contradiction that must be allowed to stand as such to mark the impossibility of resolving the dilemma it poses by choosing one term instead of another, as in the case of the two propositions, “the

economy is determinant in the last instance” and “the last instance never comes.” Is it possible to understand the proposition that the different modalities of matter are “all rooted or grounded (*enracinées*) in physical matter” *in the last instance* as another point of heresy? This would mean that the modalities of matter can be understood as rooted in physical matter only at the point, temporally and perhaps spatially, of the last instance, a point at which they never arrive or which never becomes present to them.

Why then does Althusser insist on the words “matter” and “materiality” and their modalities given the fact that the “theory of the differences between the modalities of materiality” has yet to be constructed and remains a problem? Precisely in order to evoke the notion of tenacity, which we can call resistance: matter resists in the sense that it is irreducible, a notion that rules out theories of emanation or expression which would render matter (in relation to spirit), or some modality of matter in relation to other modalities, less real, less material than others of which it would be the phenomena. Ideology can no longer be understood except as immanent in the material form of the apparatuses and practices which confer upon it its effective reality and render it knowable. For Althusser discourse itself was resistant and irreducible to something more real than itself: he came to understand by the fear and aggression his writings provoked that words, his words, could become weapons powerful enough to break the hold of the obvious, open a space for thought and action, and prepare for the battles to come.

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